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AUTHOR Canale, Michael
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ABSTRACT

An Ontario program providing sets of problem-solving activities for native French speakers helps students in grades 7-12 enrich their language proficiency in both French and English. The guides developed as part of the program emphasize language as a tool for thought, social interaction, and artistic expression, and focus on the integration of receptive and productive skills in authentic and collaborative language-learning and language-use environments. Among the early results of the program is the finding that students and teachers are receptive to the idea that the teacher's role is to transfer responsibility for minority culture and language enrichment to the learners. The interest in problem-solving activities comes from cognitive development research, and the activities range from small-group tasks to two-week projects and drama productions taking several months. Key characteristics of the tasks include variable focus, differentiation, mutual support, generation of new activities and various types of motivation, language variety, variety of problems and the strategies they produce, and the naturalness with which language and other skill areas or cognitive systems are integrated. Language-use strategies are emphasized as important, in combination with language development and problem-solving activities, for the development of interactional and critical thinking skills. (MSE)

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A Theory of Strategy-Oriented Language Development

Michael Canale

The term *theory* in my title is not used to refer to an explicit or formal model of language development that might have practical applications. Rather, the term is used to refer to the efforts that a group of learners, teachers, and researchers in Ontario are making in order to understand the key components and value of a variety of activities that we have been jointly exploring in language classrooms at the 7–10 grade levels during the past year. With the general aim of sharing a few elements of our current work and theorizing about the findings, this paper briefly summarizes the project in which we are engaged, our current thinking about problem-posing activities, and our current views on language-use strategies.

Project Overview

Our project, entitled "Problem-Solving Materials for Français and Anglais Classrooms: Language Enrichment Modules," is a two-year curriculum material research and development project funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education. As is perhaps evident from the project title, the group the project seeks to serve is French-speaking students and educators, who represent a minority in Ontario—less than 6 percent of the population. As is also perhaps evident from the project title, the main goal of our work is to provide sets of problem-solving activities to help students enrich their language proficiency in both their native language (French) and second language (English). These activities are intended to provide concrete examples of language curriculum goals and classroom methods compatible with new curriculum guideline documents under preparation by the ministry for both Français and Anglais at the intermediate (grades 7–10) and senior (grades 11–12) levels in Ontario public French language schools. It is worth mentioning here that these guideline documents emphasize language as a tool for thought, a tool for social interaction, and a tool for artistic expression. The guidelines also emphasize integration of receptive and productive skills in authentic and collaborative language-learning and language-use environments.

Our main method for researching and developing activities on the project has been to co-teach and otherwise cooperate with learners and teachers in eight classrooms in the Toronto and Ottawa areas. Two aspects of our method are particularly noteworthy: first, we have been co-teaching with teachers who themselves were identified as exemplary language teachers, i.e. as exceptionally industrious and gifted; second, we have been working with these teachers and their students for six months on the average. We have recorded data created through this method in many ways: our own field notes, teacher and student written logs, and audio and video recordings. Analysis of these data has been and will continue to be carried out in constant collaboration with the learners and teachers who are our co-investigators. Perhaps our most important general finding to date is that both learners and teachers have proven to be receptive to the challenging notion that the role of the teacher is to transfer responsibility for minority culture and language enrichment to the learners themselves.

Problem-Posing Activities

Our general interest in problem-posing (or problem-solving) activities owes much to the cognitive developmental framework articulated by Case and Bereiter (1984). Put briefly, this framework focuses on the representation of problems (or tasks or situations), the representation of solutions to problems, and the actual strategies used both to arrive at these representations and to bridge the gap between a problem and its solution. All of these representations and strategies are viewed developmentally with special emphasis on understanding successful and unsuccessful behavior at each developmental stage.

Our specific interest in problem-posing activities in language development reflects three views on the nature of language learning and language use. First, language learning and use are problem-posing activities by their very nature and hence involve a broad range of strategies (Breen, Candlin, and Waters 1979). Second, in spite of needs analyses and various communicative approaches, learners more often than not face frustrating problems in actual language use. Hence, according to Faerch and Kasper (1983, 31), "instead of basing a syllabus on the rather unrealistic assumption that it should prevent the learner from running into communicative problems, one can adopt an alternative approach which acknowledges the potential problematicity of [target language] communication, and incorporate ways of dealing with such problems into the syllabus." Third, learners may be more resourceful and confident in dealing with such problems in actual language use to the extent that they have already experienced and dealt with them in a supportive learning environment (Rivers 1983).

The problem-posing activities we have been exploring range from brief small-group tasks, to two-week projects involving the creation of interactive adventure stories on microcomputer, to multimonth class drama productions. A concrete example is that of a brief oral interaction activity in which groups of learners are required to find and later remove a treasure hidden on an imaginary farm (Breen and Candlin 1982). The activity is described in the following.

Learners are divided into groups of four such that within each group the students vary in their oral proficiency in the target language. Each group is given a map of the farm and each member of the group is given a different clue (written in the most commonly shared language of the learners other than the target language) about the location of the treasure. All four clues are necessary in order to locate the treasure, and all communication must take place through the target language or gestures. Each group member thus has a specific responsibility, and all must assist one another to achieve a common goal. As a result, learners must negotiate, interpret, express, and assess meanings at cognitive, social, linguistic, and affective levels (i.e., create and use a variety of representations and strategies at each level). Learners' performances may be tracked through audio or video recording and through observation notes taken by other learners or the teacher. Teachers and learners can then analyze the performance; focus attention on problems and strategies, as appropriate; re-do the activity using different clues; design similarly structured activities based on different themes; discuss the strengths and weaknesses of different solutions; and so forth.

A few of the important characteristics of this activity are also key ones in other problem-posing activities we are exploring. Some of these characteristics are as follows:

- *Variable focus.* The activity allows learners and teachers to shift attention to structural, functional, or experiential elements of language development as desired (Allen 1983).
- *Differentiation.* The activity allows for differences in problem type, peer-teaching opportunities, levels of language proficiency, learner interests, and time on task.
- *Support.* The activity encourages learners to support one another and provides supporting material as required.
- *Generation.* The activity invites learners and teachers to create new but related activities by varying such factors as content, structure of the problem, and focus of the activity.

In addition to these features, we have been analyzing activities with respect to the motivation they promote; the variety of language, prob-

lems, and strategies produced; and the naturalness with which various language and other skill areas or cognitive systems are integrated and refined.

Language-Use Strategies

Our current views on language-use strategies owe much to existing work such as that of Bialystok and Ryan (1985) and Faerch and Kasper (1983), among others. Perhaps the two most important aspects of our views follow.

First, we understand language-use strategies to include a broad range of behavior that includes at least the following continuua: verbal to nonverbal, observable to unobservable, successful to unsuccessful, expert to nonexpert, local to global, compensatory to enhancing, learning-related to productive, linguistic to pragmatic, self-directed to other-directed, prefabricated to created, immediate to extended/delayed, and goal-dictated to goal-generating. Clearly these strategies may co-occur in any language use, and more fine-grained distinctions may be made within any of these strategy types.

Second, we view such strategies positively as invaluable aids to language learning and use. This view is at least in partial contrast to the commonly advocated one that strategies are largely compensatory in nature and may cause fossilization or otherwise prevent mastery of various aspects of native-like language proficiency. There are several reasons for our positive view of strategies. For instance, certain strategies are not only natural and necessary but also desirable at different stages and with different focuses within a problem-posing activity. In addition, use of and reflection upon strategies can serve not only to develop more resourceful language learners but also allow assessment and research to take place in an unintrusive manner within the context of classroom activities. Finally, more resourceful and reflective learners may be in a position to accept more responsibility for further learning and assessment; that is, to become more active agents and co-investigators in their own language enrichment and in that of their peers (Scardamalia and Bereiter 1983).

Conclusion

While this brief summary paper has outlined some of our current thinking on the value of problem-posing activities and language-use strategies for language development, it should be emphasized that we view language development, problem-posing activities, and strategies as important for the development of the interactional and critical thinking skills that also play a crucial role in academic achievement. In this respect, we share an interest with researchers such as Cummins (1984) and Wells (1982) in the relationship between language development and academic

success, especially in minority language education.

It should also be emphasized that we are increasingly aware of the numerous and serious limitations of our current thinking. For example, we recognize that some language learning and use may be more problematic than others; consequently, we risk trivializing the notion of problem posing and misrepresenting language learning and use by seeking to understand all language activities and strategies as problem-related. Also, we recognize just how much our own thinking reflects "practice-driven theory" rather than more rigorous and profound theory construction. We accept, for the moment, these and other limitations on our work since we also recognize that the activities we are exploring may or may not be of value for the reason that any theory of language development would be hard put to describe and explain.

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